



# Decolonizing Art History

Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price

When, in 2015, students at the University of Cape Town in South Africa demanded the removal of a statue of British colonial and diamond merchant Cecil Rhodes from their campus, they initiated what was to become a global call to ‘decolonize the university’. In the same year, students at University College London began to ask the question: why is my curriculum white? Other public sector cultural institutions soon joined the chorus in an overdue acknowledgement that unspoken colonial legacies had for too long upheld and promulgated white privilege. The role of public sculpture as a catalyst for political debate and change has a long tradition within art’s histories. It serves to remind us of the centrality of the discipline in promoting and maintaining dominant cultural values; and yet it also enables us to interrogate them as historically located and subject to inevitable temporal mutation. Whilst postcolonial studies and critical race studies have been informing and challenging the shape of art history for several decades, new generations of students, scholars, critics, curators, collectors, artists and audiences are seeking radical re-evaluations of the academy and those cultural institutions who hold themselves up as standard-bearers of our collective cultural heritage. But, what, if anything, is specific about the current moment’s demands to reassess how universities, museums, and galleries teach, research, collect and exhibit? How can art historians, curators, collectors, museum directors, artists and writers respond to the call to decolonize art history? How can we draw from the rich legacy of postcolonial, feminist, queer and Marxist perspectives within art history, and what are the new theoretical perspectives that are needed?

Writing these questions within the context of the UK, the backdrop of Brexit cannot be ignored, along with the impact of austerity and precarity in the university and museum sectors, and the rise of nationalism and xenophobia in response to both economic and political migration. There is a sense of instability in the political landscape, and conversations are often harder to hear than accusations, condemnation or dismissal. This is coupled with an increasing sense of art history being an embattled discipline, an unnecessary luxury for many students faced with tens of thousands of pounds of student debt. Yet conversely some of the loudest voices in the conversations around decolonizing art and its histories have been from young artists, scholars, curators and students, demanding that the institutions from which they feel excluded start to listen. For many of us working within (and alongside) the discipline of art history, these calls have asked us to reckon with what we do as teachers, scholars and curators. In order to continue this conversation, we have asked a range of art historians, curators and artists

**Abe Odedina, *Beulah’s Garden*, 2018. Acrylic on plywood, 122.2 x 122.2 cm. London: Collection of the artist. © Abe Odedina. Photo: Ed Cross Fine Art/Alan Roderick.**

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to respond to a series of questions that consider some of the recent calls to ‘decolonize art history’. The responses vary in format, length and focus. We offered some guidelines regarding length but otherwise were open to the ways in which the questions were addressed. Continuing the vision for Art History set out by Price in her inaugural editorial in February 2018, the following seeks to give space to some of the conversations that many of us are having within and between our institutions. The questionnaire format indicates that there is not one way to ‘decolonize art history’, but rather it is a debate that the editorial board of Art History, alongside many of our colleagues in the discipline, feels needs public discussion. We publish the questions and a selection of the responses below.

*What is the historical specificity of current calls to decolonize art history? How are they different from previous challenges to the discipline (such as postcolonialism, feminism, queer studies, Marxism)?*

*What is your understanding of decolonizing art history now? What does a decolonized art history look like? How should it be written/practised?*

*How might the decolonization of art history impact upon your own area of research/practice? What would be produced from it? Might anything have to be jettisoned?*

*Where should decolonization in relation to art history happen? What strategies might different spaces for decolonization demand?*

### **David A. Bailey**

*What is the historical specificity of current calls to decolonize art history? How are they different from previous challenges to the discipline (such as postcolonialism, feminism, queer studies, Marxism)?*

I think that it is important to break down the idea of ‘decolonizing’ into how this emerges in the form of movements. I am from a generation or movement of artists, writers, theorists and activists who came together in the 1980s to take control of discourses of both race and art production. In my case this meant becoming a guest editor for key magazines and journals such as *Ten.8* or curating major shows in institutions such as the ICA, Whitechapel and Hayward Gallery. In the publication *Shades of Black* (a project with Sonia Boyce and Ian Baucom) we try to historicize a moment that called for and changed infrastructural and epistemological ways of looking at a British art practice. I think what we are seeing now is how a new generation of people, or in other words ‘another movement’, are taking on and at the same time learning about this history. So I think it’s about describing specific formations of various moments that have emerged in relation to this question.

*What is your understanding of decolonizing art history now? What does a decolonized art history look like? How should it be written/practised?*

I think a decolonized art history should always include multiple narratives so that it’s about different histories and not a story that becomes the canon. When I was working on the Harlem Renaissance exhibition *Rhapsodies In Black* in the 1990s (with Richard Powell



## Pamela N. Corey

*What is the historical specificity of current calls to decolonize art history? How are they different from previous challenges to the discipline (such as postcolonialism, feminism, queer studies, Marxism)?*

The call to decolonize art history now appears to target a broader swathe of institutions and institutional practices that shape art history as a practice of knowledge and as a public resource, most notably the university and the museum, than previously. What situates these calls in the current moment is the recognition that the problems that postcolonial, feminist, queer, and Marxist critiques addressed in recent decades have not only lingered, but have become even more entrenched with the consolidation of the university as a neoliberal institution.

*What is your understanding of decolonizing art history now? What does a decolonized art history look like? How should it be written/practised?*

To decolonize art history now is to cite, expose, and critically respond to the structures and residues of the colonial project as they have shaped the discipline and its institutionalization. Critical response entails rendering such structures (linguistic, temporal, ontological) transparent and as sites of intervention (rather than simply dismissing them as inapplicable or of no value). It also involves engaging in the work of decentralizing and reconfiguring modes of creating, representing, and disseminating knowledge. What distinguishes the decolonial from the postcolonial is the recognition that today's structures of inequity and suppression have complex relationships to historical projects of empire (beyond 'the West and the rest' paradigm), and that new hierarchies of power have been compounded through autocratic forms of the postcolonial state in tandem with vested interests in the movement of global capital. Decolonial art-historical work addresses these forces as they have taken shape not only through the canons and timelines propounded by the discipline's centring (and production) of 'the West', but also through the production of exclusionary nationalist narratives of art history and their representative institutions, and in the current beleaguered state of governmental support, through the compromises made to sustain funding and major donations to universities and museums.

*How might the decolonization of art history impact upon your own area of research/practice? What would be produced from it? Might anything have to be jettisoned? Where should decolonization in relation to art history happen? What strategies might different spaces for decolonization demand?*

In my work on contemporary art in Southeast Asia (in particular Vietnam and Cambodia) and its diasporas, I have been particularly concerned with exclusionary modes of identification as they have been reified through categories installed by colonial regimes, nationalist historiographies, and developmental discourses. The latter may take form, for example, through what Sarat Maharaj has called 'multicultural managerialism', in many instances today taking on the guise of the decolonial project but misconstrued through ill-conceived diversity initiatives.<sup>1</sup> These are not independent of one another; it is important to understand the ways in which constricted identifications of artists and their works linger as a result of a confluence of such phenomena, and the ways in which these can be tracked historically and across geographies. In terms of questioning and reorganizing

such categories and systems of interpretation, whether it be style-based classifications of sculpture or heavily context-driven framings of practising artists, some of the most significant contributions to the field of Southeast Asian art history came from Stanley J. O'Connor and T. K. Sabapathy.<sup>2</sup> These are scholars who beginning in the 1970s dared to merge methodologies and perspectives on art and culture from beyond the East–West and premodern–modern binaries, and were deeply attentive to the value of historiographical examination. They were public-facing intellectuals who also addressed the role of the university classroom, the museum, and the field site as vital contexts for such knowledge production. In so doing, they inaugurated new ways of writing and teaching about art in Southeast Asia, and in my view, were doing decolonial work *avant la lettre*.

For communities engaged with modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art history, the call for decentralization is strong, in terms of representation from within the region and the provision of greater access to resources. It is important to recognize that undergraduate and postgraduate curricula in art history – as a primary course of study – are scarce in the region, with what are arguably more substantial programmes at either BA or MA level in the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia. Efforts to produce and share knowledge in the region and beyond the institution have resulted in the founding of an open-access scholarly journal dedicated to Southeast Asian art and visual culture, in one instance.<sup>3</sup> My caution is that decolonization must continue to situate such scholarship as a part of ‘the centre’ rather than apart from it as a disciplinary annex. More is needed beyond representation. In this vein, I would be very hesitant to pronounce any materials, theories, or systems of knowledge as subject to jettisoning. Such an urge would seem to echo nativist permutations of colonial pedagogies that suppressed access to ‘modern’ foreign influences deemed unsuitable for colonized subjects.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sarat Maharaj (interviewed by Daniel Birnbaum), ‘In Other’s Words’, *Artforum*, 40: 6, 1 February 2002, 106–110.

<sup>2</sup> For Stanley J. O'Connor I am thinking in particular of his essay ‘Art Critics, Connoisseurs, and Collectors in the Southeast Asian Rain Forest: A Study in Cross-Cultural Art Theory’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 14: 2, September 1983, 400–408. See also Nora A. Taylor, ed., *Studies in Southeast Asian Art: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. O'Connor*, Ithaca, NY, 2000. For T. K. Sabapathy, see the recently published anthology of his writings: T. K. Sabapathy, Ahmad Mashadi, Susie Lingham, Peter Schoppert, and Joyce Toh, *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia, 1973–2015*, Singapore, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, published by the National University of Singapore Press, <https://muse.jhu.edu/journal/716>.

## James D’Emilio

*What is the historical specificity of current calls to decolonize art history? How are they different from previous challenges to the discipline (such as postcolonialism, feminism, queer studies, Marxism)?*

Calls to decolonize art history build on earlier movements. The historical specificity of this moment may lie less in a new ‘challenge’ than in a worldwide reactionary turn threatening art, culture, and education. In North America and Europe, neoliberal corporate economies exacerbate inequalities and unleash authoritarian, demagogic politics that ignite xenophobic nationalisms. Those championing decolonization of the curriculum, canon, and institutions of art history should beware of fragmentation